

Chapter I

Faith on the Frontier

The turn of the 19th Century saw the Ohio Valley emerging from a wilderness, and at a rapid pace. The great waterway that eased the path of settlers into the Northwest Territory would soon become a virtual highway of commerce. The City of Cincinnati, founded in 1788, had firmly established an anchor point of civilization in the region, its military garrison offering relative security, its industry encouraging further development.

Settlement, as always, followed the waterways. By the time Ohio had achieved statehood in 1803, Clermont County was also being settled rapidly. The frontier had been pushed well back from the banks of the Ohio into the center of the county, into the fertile bottoms of the Little Miami, the East Fork, and their tributaries. Surrounding highlands soon were likewise cleared for the agriculture that found ready markets in the expanding city and its access to down-river commerce.

As was true for the region as a whole, the origin of the incoming settlers was diverse in Clermont County, but the predominance, as the name suggests, was French. Huguenots and Catholics alike, for reasons as numerous as themselves, undertook the hardships of the frontier in search of the freedom and opportunity promised by the new land. Germans, too, found the region particularly attractive. Irish immigrants joined the flow of settlement into central Clermont County in significant numbers. A large segment of this early population was of Catholic heritage. And so, the stage was early set for the establishment of a flourishing, practicing Catholic Community in the heart of a County barely wrested from the wilderness.

Prior to the Revolution and the ultimate victory of the Colonists, creating an independent nation, the region of the upper mid-west, later to become the Northwest Territory, was part of the Diocese of Quebec, Canada.

When settlement of the Northwest Territories began, jurisdiction was transferred to the Diocese of Baltimore. That Diocese split in 1808 and a new Diocese was formed, headquartered in Bardstown, Kentucky. It included "the area West of the Allegheny Mountains," the whole extent of which was barely known.

In 1821 the Diocese of Cincinnati was established and included all of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan and Wisconsin. Edward Fenwick, pioneer missionary of the Ohio region, was made the first Bishop.

While Catholicism had come to the Miami Valley in 1749 when Father Peter de Bonnevilles chaplain of a party of French explorers sent to proclaim French sovereignty over the Western territory, celebrated Mass at the mouth of the Little Miami River, the City itself was controlled by Scottish and English settlers of a decidedly Protestant bent. The first Mass, celebrated on Easter Sunday